

Why don't babies talk like adults?

Kids go from 'goo-goo' to talkative one step at a time

by Joshua Hartshorne

A recent e-trade advertisement shows a baby speaking directly to the camera: 'Look at this,' he says, 'I'm a free man. I go anywhere I want now.' He describes his stock-buying activities, and then his phone rings. This advertisement proves what comedians have known for years: few things are as funny as a baby who talks like an adult. But it also raises an important question: Why don't young children express themselves clearly like adults?

Many people **assume** children learn to talk by copying what they hear. In other words, they listen to the words adults use and the **situations** in which they use them and **imitate** accordingly. **Behaviourism**, the scientific approach that dominated American cognitive science for the first half of the 20th century, made exactly this **argument**.

However, this **'copycat' theory** can't explain why **toddlers** aren't as **conversational** as adults. After all, you never hear literate adults express themselves in one-word sentences like 'bottle' or 'doggie'. In fact, it's easy for scientists to show that a copycat theory of **language acquisition** can't explain children's first words. What is hard for them to do is to explain these first words, and how they fit into the language acquisition pattern.

Yes / No / Not Given

- 1 People are extremely amused when they see a baby talk like an adult. _____
- 2 Behaviourists of the early 20th century argued that children learn to speak by copying adults.
- 3 Children have more conversations with adults than with other children.
- 4 Scientists have found it easy to work out why babies use one-word sentences.